

SLOW JAMES: THINKING THROUGH THE LETTER OF JAMES

'Faith works: does yours?'

The so-called 'Letter of James' is akin to a literary genre known as 'diatribe', which has been called 'the pagan equivalent of the Christian sermon' (*Oxford Classical Dictionary*). It is a sharp, sometimes witty, often indignant *exposé* of the foibles and vices of people in society. It takes various forms, such as a public lecture, or a correspondence with a real or fictitious character who is assumed to have raised philosophical or moral issues (as for example the *Epistulae Morales* of the Younger Seneca). Its style is uneven, disorganised, often intemperate and scathing. It has features in common with the genre of 'satire' which originally meant 'a hotpotch'. It is what used to be known as 'table talk', and we still meet it today in *Private Eye*, in the 'letters' of agony aunts and in the columns of tabloid newspapers. In Christian terms, it is not so much a 'sermon' in the sense of an ordered exposition with doctrine leading to practice (like Paul's Letter to the Romans), as a 'homily' putting across a medley of ideas addressed to up-to-the-minute needs and questions, and often dropping one theme in favour of another before returning to it again.

Who then is our 'James'? For the purposes of this exercise, I'm going to follow the traditional account, and suppose that he was the brother (or half-brother) of our Lord (Mk 6:3), who didn't believe in him during his lifetime (Jn 7:5), but met him after the Resurrection (1 Cor 15:7), joined the disciples (Acts 1:14), was included among the 'apostles' (Gal 1:19), was a 'pillar' (or even the leader) of the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:9), and who (according to the Jewish historian Josephus) was put to death by stoning in AD 61-62. Whether James (whose original name, Jacob, was later italianised into Giacomo which was anglicised as James) wrote this 'letter' as a single composition, or whether it is an edited selection of passages from his sermons, is anybody's guess. Nor do we know whether its date is early in the NT sequence (around AD 45-47) or whether it was composed before or after AD 62. We don't even know whether James personally listened to Jesus' teaching; in any case the story about Jesus' mother and brothers trying to take him home because they thought he was going mad (Mk 3:21, 31-35) suggests that it didn't make much impact on them. How come, then, that so many echoes of Jesus' reported words crop up throughout this letter? This must be due to the oral traditions about Jesus which were circulating in that first Christian generation, and which were crystallising into the Sermon on the Mount and the other Gospel accounts. Traditionally, James led a life of personal discipline and moral integrity, evidenced in his nickname 'The Just', and sustained by God's grace in the Holy Spirit (Jas 4:5-6) which had set him free from a narrow legalism.

James' letter as we have it is consistent with this tradition. There is a pithy, even quirky, certainly pointed and pictorial quality about his writing, which doesn't take prisoners and may draw blood; but rays of gentleness and pastoral concern also break through. There's a directness and originality about James' letter which compels respect and may even inspire affection. If we occasionally feel we want to defuse the explosive nature of his attacks, we still need to let him expose our complacency and our compromises.

I have tried to work through the Greek text (Koinē) of the Letter, together with such Old Testament passages as I could identify in the Septuagint (LXX). Commentaries and expositions occasionally drawn upon include R V G Tasker (1957), Alec Motyer (1970, BST 1985), Peter Davids (NBC 4th ed 1994), Douglas Moo (1985 revised 2015), Tom Wright *Early Christian Letters for Everyone* (2011) and D A Carson in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament* (Beale and Carson 2007). However, I am entirely responsible for the idiosyncratic nature of what follows; I have set out to 'explicate' James in my own words, often departing wilfully from the original (which is given in the NIV 2011 translation at the top of each section) much after the manner of a skier who both cruises the main pistes and explores off-piste as it comes, while careful to avoid precipices, pine-trees and other skiers. In biblical terms, like the 'kingdom scribe' of Matthew 13:52 I've tried to 'bring out treasure that is both new and old.'

1:1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

Who are we?

[1:1] Right then! Morning everybody. My name's Jacob (or James, if you like) and I work for God. In fact, I work for Jesus. Same thing. He's the One we've all been looking for, and he's changed my life. Who are you? You're grain from God's seed-bag, scattered far and wide. Wherever you are on earth, God's harvest is coming up, even if you don't see it yet. You're God's faith-family which started with Abraham, Isaac and my namesake Jacob, and now it's Jew and Gentile in the new Israel. Great news, isn't it! FAITH WORKS. Does yours?

1:2-4 ² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Tested to destruction?

[1:2] I get letters from all over the world, so here are a few things that tend to come up, with an all-too-brief response from me. This one, for example: 'You have no idea what I'm going through as a Christian – in fact, I'm on the point of giving up. Help!' Brother, sister, that's music to my ears. Being tested to destruction? Fantastic! Jesus told his first followers that they'd be reviled and persecuted and have filthy lies told about them because they're holding true to him, and that's the best news ever – why? – because their faith is working properly and heaven has noticed. [1:3] You must realise there's a lot of fake Christianity around. People start well then give up. Jesus said that too. Your faith-roots need to burrow deep into the soil and cling on to all the nourishing stuff down there. [1:4] If you're going to be a fully-grown plant that survives all the weather that's thrown at it, you need total stickability. Body, soul and spirit all attuned to God's will. No reserve, no retreat, no regrets. Brilliant!

1:5-8 ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

God loves idiots

[1:5] To follow that up, here's another question I often get asked: 'I think I'm making progress towards being a mature Christian, but sometimes I wish I understood a little more. Do you have a course on guidance, spiritual intelligence, that kind of thing?' Well, I could suggest, for instance, that you read a chapter of the Proverbs of Solomon every day for a month, but what does it say on the very first page? 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. Don't badger me, badger God for it. Go to the fountain-head. God's goodness never runs dry. The Lord said, 'Ask, and it will be given to you.' That's a straight promise. Ask humans for teaching and they'll set conditions on it and privately curse you for wasting their time. God's different. You may be an idiot, but if you're coming to him because you don't know where else to go, you're the kind of idiot God loves to bits.

[1:6] 'But don't I need massive amounts of faith for that?' You sound a bit neurotic, if I may say so. Of course you need faith, but faith isn't something you work up in yourself until you feel full of it. Jesus said all we need is mustard-seed faith. Tiny faith in a massive God. Answers to prayer don't depend on how much faith you have, they depend on how good God is at moving mountains, calming storms, that kind of thing. If you can't believe prayer would make any difference, then you're like those disciples heaving up and down in their tiny boat and wondering if having Jesus on board was a waste of space. No peace for them, as Isaiah said. They thought the storm was bigger than all of them, the Lord included, whereas they plus Jesus were bigger than any storm.

[1:7-8] The kind of person who will get absolutely nothing from God however hard they pray are what you could call Mr or Mrs Facing-Both-Ways. You never know whether they're going forwards or backwards. Prayer is just one option out of many: if it doesn't work, try self-help, or write to your rich uncle, or practise anxiety techniques, or blame the government. Anything but quiet trust in God. Do you get the point? If not, why not go to God and ask him about it? Not sure if it would work? That just about sums it up.

1:9-11 ⁹ Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. ¹⁰ But the rich should take pride in their humiliation – since they will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

How to jump for joy

[1:9-10] Here's another one I keep getting. 'I and my family are very hard up, and we frequently don't know where the next meal is coming from. We've put our trust in Christ and are members of a little church in the city here. The other day a speaker stood up and quoted from the Book of Proverbs, "The blessing of the Lord makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it," and he said if we were poor or distressed it was a sign God wasn't blessing us. Is he right?' No, he's a fool, because he can't see the plain meaning of the text. It's not about material wealth, it's about heavenly treasure. Christians can be as poor as harvest mice yet be leaping for sheer joy, because God has taken them off the spiritual dung-heap and raised them to sit with Christ on his throne. Rich people who come to know Christ can jump for joy too, because they've found release from worldly pride and status-hunting; they now acknowledge what they've secretly known all along, that when Jesus compared humanity to a meadow flower, here today and gone tomorrow, he was dead right, if only we would listen to him. [1:11] The prophets said it too. Isaiah and Jeremiah go on about the way wealth, fame and human glory can disappear just like that, so why depend upon them for a single moment? You take your dog for a walk through a meadow in the freshness of the dawn, with the grass springing up green and strong, and you wonder at all the wild flowers in their colour and variety – yet when you come back the same evening the summer sun has done its devastating work, and the scorching wind has sucked all the moisture from the plants, and there is that beautiful field lying withered and lifeless. That's exactly what happens so often to someone who's got stacks of cash – today they're scurrying from one board meeting to another, raking in the profits of all their successful enterprises and with their name on everyone's lips, and tomorrow the bottom's gone out of the market and they're in a debtors' prison. Exaggeration? Show me the rich person who doesn't lie awake at night wondering if it's going to happen to them.

1:12-18 ¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. ¹³ When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. ¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

Trials are survivable

[1:12] Here's someone coming back to me on the theme of 'stickability' which I started on earlier. 'It's all very well telling me to hang in there, but pressures are coming at me so thick and fast that it really seems as if God is trying to sink me for good.' There's so much I want to say here. Firstly, whatever your trial, it's survivable. I said earlier that we should cheer up when we're being tested, but of course the perfection of joy comes at the end when the prizes are being handed out. Everyone who finishes the race gets a victory medal inscribed with a capital 'L' for 'Life'. Jesus promised us this, didn't he? There's Life at the end of the hard and narrow road, he said. The ultimate test is, do we actually love him more than anything else? Even if we have to die for him?

Blame yourself, not God or the devil

[1:13] Second point, I don't want anyone saying, 'Oh, it's OK to give way to this or that evil impulse, because ultimately it comes from God, like everything else in life.' Let's be perfectly clear: God may test us to develop our own growth in holiness, but the devil tempts us to destroy us. God's will is absolutely good and he never colludes with wrongdoing in any shape or form; if he seems to be giving people like Abraham or Job a hard time, it's not because he's malicious or twisted. There is no way God will countenance evil for a single second. Have you got that straight? If you are thinking of doing what you know to be wrong, you are experiencing temptation, and Jesus told us to pray specifically to our Father that not only would he

deliver us from the clutches of evil, but that he wouldn't let us anywhere near its tempting power, knowing how helpless and seducible we are.

[1:14] Which brings me to the third point. Here you are, contemplating a course of action which you know to be wrong. You can't blame God, so you blame the devil instead. Sorry mate, but the only person you have to blame is yourself. You think you're so righteous that you couldn't possibly do that thing, but all the time you secretly want it. There you are inside the house talking to the Lord as you usually do, and this attractively dressed temptation appears at the window and suggests you go to the front door for just a tiny chat. [1:15] 'I'll be back in a moment,' you tell the Lord, but you may not be. Shorten the distance between yourself and the temptation and it will get you, sure as anything. It's like conceiving a baby: once the seed is sown, the result is on its way, only in this case the child is Sin itself, and when it gets to full term as it must, instead of bringing a joyful new life into the world, it results in death and destruction.

[1:16] I'm putting all this in deliberately offensive terms in order to wake you up. You need to get your ideas straight, because there's so much out there that is telling you the opposite. Once you let yourself be fooled about who God is and what is his attitude to right and wrong, you'll wander off the path and over the cliff edge. If you think God wants you to follow where sin beckons, just remember that he gave up his Son to die for you – he loves you that much. And he hates the sin that slew Jesus.

Modelling the new life-forms

[1:17] I've got a fourth and final point here. The Father's best and most wonderful gift to us is his Son Jesus; but because he is the great Giver, he showers blessings on us like nobody's business. If you think God is a mean old so-and-so, or that any gift of his could be less than perfect, then look at the sun (well, don't, for obvious reasons): all its light and warmth comes directly to us without any deviation or reluctance. Any shadows there are happen on our side. God is consistently and absolutely good, and he wills good for us, with our full cooperation. [1:18] 'I've never understood God's plan,' you complain. Well, let me tell you what it is in a nutshell. New birth, new life, a huge family of new people. All brought to birth by the true Word who is Jesus. The world is waiting to see what kind of creatures are going to inhabit it in the new creation. Well, you are the prototypes of those creatures. If I can put it like this: as you model the Lord Jesus and follow the One who is the way, the truth and the life, so God is modelling the life-forms who are going to walk the streets of his new Jerusalem. If God chooses to do this, as he does, then nothing is going to stop him. Want to be part of his plan?

1:19-21 ¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. ²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Clean-up campaign

[1:19] 'So bring on the revolution!' Yes, but what kind of revolution? I've had folk come up to me after I've preached along similar lines, saying they are really angry about all the wickedness on earth and they want to start a moral crusade fuelled by God's wrath against sin. They're really pumped up, I can tell you. Hey, wait a minute, you people. Have you really been listening to what God is saying? Are you so quick to write off everyone else? Are you rushing out of here to start a hate-filled orgy of world reform? [1:20] If so, you are playing into the hands of the enemy. You're trying to do God's work with the devil's weapons. Of course God wants to right wrongs and to bring in justice and mercy and all that – but not by his agents getting all steamed up and denouncing people. Just calm down and leave the judgment bit to God.

[1:21] Clean up your own act before you try to clean up others'. There's plenty of muck left in your own soul that needs dealing with. Humility is the name of the game. Just let the Word do its work (or *his* work, I should say). We're back to the parable of the Sower: let the seed go deep down into your heart-soil and bring forth a healthy crop. People out there need saving, yes of course. But they won't be if you're still on the dark side yourself.

1:22-25 ²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

The moment of truth

[1:22] ‘Oh, James, you’re so right. The Bible is vital, isn’t it? Listening to it in church being read and explained, and making a point of studying it regularly in private – we all grow spiritually when we do that.’ Well, maybe we do, maybe we don’t. You could be fooling yourself, if I may say so. The Word could be going in one ear and out the other without having any practical effect on your life. [1:23] When was the last time a sermon or a Bible study made a permanent difference to the person you are? Can you remember any word from the Lord that has made you so thoroughly uncomfortable that you’ve had to do something about it straightaway? Here’s someone accidentally catching sight of themselves reflected in a polished surface and thinking, ‘That can’t be me! So that’s what I really look like!’ [1:24] Yes, mate, that’s how others see you; but instinctively you still think of yourself as twenty years younger, so two minutes later you’re back with the version you prefer, wrinkles smoothed out, bags under your eyes gone. The moment of truth has come and gone without leaving a trace behind.

[1:25] Shall I tell you the problem? Pride. You’re so proud of your Biblical knowledge and regular attendance that you’ve never got down on your knees and begged the Lord to make it come true in your life. There’s so much self-love and self-deception he’s longing to set you free from, but you haven’t stayed long enough for him to undo the knots (which only the Word can). ‘Is that the time, Lord? Can’t stay!’ Is what he’s said to you so unmemorable? Is what he’s told you to do so impossible? Here’s the secret of truly unfettered spirituality: expect God to speak to you, and when he does, go off and do it, whatever it costs. He wants you to experience the exhilaration of knowing that you’re pleasing him and doing what Jesus would have done.

1:26-27 ²⁶ Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Practise what you preach

[1:26] ‘So, James, are you telling us we’ve got to spend more time on our devotion to Christ?’ That’s never time wasted! However, there’s a big difference between true discipleship and mere religiosity. Here’s a regular churchgoer who’s a model of piety and has a Bible quote for every occasion. Yet when they’re discussing the failings of their next-door neighbour, or telling off their family, you should hear the stuff that comes out. I’ve got more to say about the tongue later, but it’s like an untrained colt – take the bridle off for a single moment and it’s totally out of control. If you don’t practise what you preach, you’re fooling yourself about your relationship with God. [1:27] God the Father doesn’t just see his family on Sundays, he sees them every day of the week. You may know the Pentateuch by heart, but if you can’t spare a few thoughts for the family in your neighbourhood where the mother is bringing up six children on her own, or worse still where both parents have been carried off by the same disease and the children are reduced to begging in the street, can you really face God with a clear conscience? You may sing in the church choir and shout ‘Hallelujah!’ with hands upraised, but how far did you allow yourself to go at that party the night before? How many lies did you tell to get selected for that coveted job? Yes, you may quote all those texts about God forgiving even our worst sins or Jesus being our Friend, but to what extent are you really consorting with the enemy?

2:1-4 ¹ My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism. ² Suppose someone comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor person in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³ If you show special attention to the one wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say

to the one who is poor, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,'⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Everybody welcome in church?

[2:1-3] Now let's think about social distinctions within the church. The other day I was given a grubby old note which went as follows: 'Dear bruvver James, Im not joinin' the church 'ere cos it's full o' snobs. They treats the likes of us as if we was dirt.' The gent in question goes on to describe in colourful language how he found his way into a meeting of Christians and had just sat down when one of the local dignitaries swept in wearing an immaculate white toga, flashing gold rings from every finger, but couldn't find a seat; now the writer admits he hadn't had a wash for some time, being unable to afford the entry fee for the town baths, and had only one set of clothes to go about in, so he may have been less than fragrant, but anyway one of the ushers ordered him to move and gave his seat to the posh man. 'So where does I go?' said the tramp, and was told he could stand at the back, or sit on the floor where the usher could keep an eye on him. Meanwhile the toff was getting cushions to prop himself up on, and enquiries about whether he was comfortable enough, and more in the same vein. It makes me sick. That church has just plastered a sign across its front door saying 'Everybody welcome here, but only if they're well-dressed and educated.' What, when you're there to celebrate the risen and ascended Lord who ran a back-street DIY shop up north? I still hear people muttering about filthy Galileans cluttering up decent Jerusalem centres of worship. [2:4] Do you think God cares in the slightest about social background or respectable clothes? Or what accent you sing in? Where do these ideas come from? I'll tell you where: our old unregenerate nature. We've never got rid of the feeling that the King of the universe favours the upwardly socially mobile. Get down off your high horses! Spend time talking to the unlovely and the ill-favoured. Even if they need a deodorant.

2:5-7⁵ Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶ But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

How to trash God's name

[2:5] Perhaps you're not convinced. Have you really not grasped the radical nature of God's love for you? You belong to a completely new society which has torn up the old title-deeds of wealth, status and class. The only valid currency is faith that works by love. Remember Jesus' story about the rich man and the beggar? Which one gets to share the top table with Abraham? It's not your bank balance that God looks at when he's wondering who's going to inherit his royal estates, it's whether Jesus' promises mean so much to you that you've followed him through thick and thin.

[2:6] Let's talk brutal sense. People at the top of the ladder have to stay there by trampling on others (if they've even noticed their existence). This is the way the world thinks. 'Winner takes all? I'm going to be that winner even if it means personally manhandling you and your wretched family into court and taking every penny you've got. The name of the game isn't mercy, it's the survival of the fittest.' [2:7] And God sees it all. It's his verdict that counts. He's written his beautiful name of Love on everybody who believes in his Son, and it's an offence in his sight to trash that name. It doesn't matter how important you are in this world: if you lay a finger on even the humblest member of God's family, you'll find yourself answering for it in the Divine Courts of Justice.

2:8-11⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' also said, 'You shall not murder.' If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

The kingdom rule

[2:8] Let's get back to the point I was making about kingdom values. There's only one rule regarding how we deal with other people, and it's woven through the Scriptures like a purple thread: 'You're not living on a desert island,' it says, 'you've got people bumping into you the whole day long, and some of them have the misfortune to live next door to you. They're just like you, thinking and feeling human beings. Why not treat them as you would like them to treat you? Is it so hard?' It's called 'love', and it's the best way to live by far. [2:9] If however you insist on cosyng up exclusively to those with large bank balances or nice faces, can I tell you frankly that you're in trouble. You're deliberately ignoring God's declared will, because you've broken the Ten Commandments. 'Hold on, you say, I am a scrupulous observer of the Law – it's my rule of life.' [2:10] Oh yes? Do you not see that they're all intimately connected? Break one and you've broken the lot. That's because they all radiate from the one great overriding Law of Love. [2:11] God doesn't say, 'Oh, so you've just killed someone, but that's OK as long as you haven't committed adultery as well.' He's more likely to be saying, 'Even if your thoughts about that man's wife or that woman's husband are as pure as the driven snow (if they are), you've arrogantly disregarded the needs of that poor bloke over there, and that's tantamount to murder.' It's what comes from the heart that counts with God. Where are you now?

2:12-13 ¹² *Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,* ¹³ *because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

Judgmentalism

[2:12] 'But I thought you said that God's word sets us free from our old selves. Didn't Jesus say that if we heard his word and believed it, we wouldn't come under judgment ever again? What's all this about having to pass tests as to whether we've kept the Law or not? Surely the gospel tells us we're not under the law but under grace?' All perfectly true. But it all depends on what value you give that word 'believe'. Has your 'belief', your faith, affected your words and actions? [2:13] Jesus told a story about a king whose servant had had a huge debt remitted because he threw himself on the king's mercy, but who then refused to let his fellow-servant off a debt that was trivial by comparison. You can't accept God's free pardon in Christ one moment then withhold mercy from a fellow human being the next. Being forgiven floods your whole life with forgiveness. Every time you feel critical of someone else, for whatever reason, you can laugh in the face of your old judgmentalism and say, 'Jesus would have loved this unspeakably awful person – so I do too.' That's how Jesus could accept people when the Pharisees could only reject them. How much of a Pharisee are you?

2:14-19 ¹⁴ *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them?* ¹⁵ *Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.* ¹⁶ *If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?* ¹⁷ *In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.* ¹⁸ *But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.'* *Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.* ¹⁹ *You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.*

Empty-handed faith

[2:14] In this connection, we often hear pious stuff about 'empty-handed faith'. People say they've received Christ, and go, 'Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling,' so I ask a bit cheekily, 'Has the Saviour put anything in your empty hand to give to others?' How can you have true 'saving faith' if there's nothing in your life to show for it? Have you really encountered the Jesus I know? [2:15-16] The other day I heard a story I still can't quite credit: a church member found there was a family in the same street who were in rags and literally living off the crumbs of last week's bread. So he went in to see them, heard their story and so on, and his parting words were, 'Peace be with you, I hope you stay warm and have enough to eat, in fact I pray that you may have more than enough!' Then he was out of the door as quick as he could. He never came back with a food parcel or clothing or anything. Empty-handed faith. [2:17] Two-way useless faith – it doesn't help anyone else, and it won't help the so-called believer, mark my

words. It's like the Dead Sea – nothing flows out of it, and one day it will evaporate. If grace is flowing into my life, grace must flow out. Otherwise, like the manna, it stinks.

What God wants is...

[2:18] 'Ah yes,' comes a more confident reply. 'That's what I say to the justification-by-faith brigade: God couldn't care less about theology, what he wants is practical Christianity.' Mmm. Go on. 'Well, what matters is demonstration. How do I know whether you've got a faith, if your behaviour doesn't give any hint of it? On the other hand, if my life clearly gives evidence of the invisible faith within, without my having to say anything about it, that's good enough. Isn't that what you're saying, James?'

[2:19] It may be, it may not be. It's certainly true that mere head-belief doesn't make you a saint. You can hold perfectly orthodox views about the Lord our God being one God, for instance, without it affecting your life in the slightest. Remember how Jesus went about casting out demons? What did those evil powers believe? 'You are the Holy One of God!' they shrieked. They were absolutely terrified by the reality of God's presence. But they still stayed devils.

2:20-24 ²⁰ *You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?* ²¹ *Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?* ²² *You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.* ²³ *And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend.* ²⁴ *You see that people are justified by what they do and not by faith alone.*

...Belief and behaviour going together

[2:20] But I really think there's a danger of superficiality here. If you evacuate belief of any practical demonstration, true, you get empty faith. But if you evacuate behaviour of any motivating faith, you get lifeless formality. Belief and behaviour must go together. [2:21] Take Abraham, for instance. He is rightly called the father of our faith. If anybody's whole life was governed by trust in the reality and goodness of God, it was that man's. Yet his faith had to be tested in the furnace of hard choices. He got the unmistakable directive that he was to go and sacrifice his only son Isaac on a hilltop altar. So he actually stretched forth his hand to slay the lad. [2:22] What's going on here? Abraham's belief in God isn't merely theoretical ('Oh yes I believe that God shows us his will'), it's hammered out on the anvil of competing priorities. If God says I lose my son in the interests of his world plan, then I lose my son. Faith took concrete form on that mountain of Moriah, just as it would do hundreds of years later when God really did lose his only Son in the interests of saving the world.

Walk the talk, talk the walk

[2:23] Oh yes, I know the great statement about Abraham believing God and so getting his name inscribed in the Book of the righteous comes before Isaac is even born. Abraham's friendship with God starts the moment he says 'Yes, I can't see how, but I still believe it, because you're You.' Before that he was God's lackey; now he has a relationship. But do you see how that relationship has got to be demonstrated in action? It would have been meaningless if he'd said, 'Oh, God, I believe you're there, but I'm not going to do what you say because I don't really trust you.' So we get the quite extraordinary story of the lad, the altar, the knife and the angel. Abraham had to be taken to that impossible point of obedience, to show that God was his friend before any other consideration.

[2:24] That's why the 'belief alone' and 'behaviour alone' brigades both fall short of the relationship God requires of us. Loving God means that you act out what you profess. Profession of faith on its own cuts no ice with God. Discipleship is talk *and* walk, not one or the other. 'OK, James, I think I get it – but could you put in words of one syllable exactly what you are saying?' Yes. There's unhelpful teaching going round the block at the moment. One side is saying, 'Do what God wants and you're saved.' The Judaistic, legalist heresy. The other side is saying, 'Believe and do what you like, you're saved.' The liberty and license heresy. What is God saying? 'Don't talk of love, show me!' Walk the talk, and talk the walk. Life *and* lip. There you are – one-syllable words. Good enough?

2:25-26 ²⁵ *In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?* ²⁶ *As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.*

Lessons from a prostitute

[2:25] How shockable are you? Probably the most immoral person in the whole of Jericho was an ancestor of mine called Rahab. She ran the town brothel, she was a madam, a slut, a liar and a traitor to her people. Yet her faith saved her life. She acknowledged the One True God and was given membership in Israel. There's hope for us all! But her faith had to be tested in the world of hard choices: what was she to do with the spies? The fact that she harboured them under the noses of the city authorities, then sent them off one way and the manhunt another, showed her faith taking concrete expression. That's what I mean by 'works' – not that her lifestyle earned her pardon, far from it! – but that making the Lord her absolute priority affected all her decisions and all her actions from now on.

[2:26] So do you see? Having a formal faith, paying lip-service to Christ, tagging along with the people of God, doesn't make you a Christian any more than having flesh and blood makes you a living body. You've got to be breathing, for heaven's sake! Faith in action is the breath of the reborn Christian. Otherwise you're a corpse on its way to the graveyard. Hallo? Is anybody there?

3:1-2 ¹ *Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.* ² *We all stumble in many ways. Those who are never at fault in what they say are perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.*

The responsibility of church teachers

[3:1] Let's move on. Here's another issue. 'We have a lively church and everybody wants to stand up and expound the scriptures. Should they be sent on courses, get certificates of teaching competence, that kind of thing? Or should we just stick to one professionally qualified church leader, pastor and teacher?' I've already touched on this vital topic so it's time to major on it now. I know the church needs teachers but they (or should I say we) are not made by going on courses. We are called by God and our responsibility is so great that there's going to be a section of the Great Judgment Hall reserved especially for us, manned by the most eagle-eyed inspectors in the whole team. [3:2] If perfection is the standard, we're all done for. Have we always said the right thing? Had the exact word for every occasion? Always voiced God's thinking rather than our own bright ideas? That young, spirited horse I was talking about – it takes a superbly skilled equestrian to control its slightest motion, like those show-jumpers who ride a perfect round to win the cup. So with those who direct the body of Christ which is the church.

3:3-5a ³ *When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.* ⁴ *Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.* ⁵ *Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.*

Small things can have great effects

[3:3] When you want to control a horse, how do you do it? By bit, bridle and reins. The bit goes into the horse's mouth, the bridle keeps it there, the reins stay firmly in the rider's hands, and lo and behold you have perfect control of the animal's every movement. So too when a church is fully under the control of its Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, it happens through 'the horse's mouth', those who speak words of wisdom that affect everyone's lives. [3:4] Or to change the analogy, the church is like a sturdy little ship forging onwards through choppy waters. When the winds threaten to send it off course, it can be kept heading on its way by the smallest piece of equipment on the whole boat, the rudder – as long as it's in the hands of an experienced captain.

[3:5a] And that's the vital thing. Wisdom and experience. As I said, any wisdom we have is one of those gifts from God we need to receive one hundred-per-cent from him, not depending on any contribution from ourselves. Because while our tongues are very small compared to other organs in our bodies, they can do enormous damage if they're at the service of human pride and selfish ambition.

3:5b-8 *Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*

⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by human beings, ⁸ but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

The tongue's power for evil

[3:5b] Don't think I'm exaggerating. Let's change the analogy yet again. It only takes a small spark to start a forest fire. You're cooking something for your family picnic, and everything's under control, when suddenly a stray spark leaps into the dry undergrowth and soon the whole area is blazing, with dire consequences for vast acres of woodland. [3:6] That spark represents the human tongue. It's as though the whole world of fallen human nature, its ego-centred ambitions, desires and assumptions, were concentrated into one tiny member of the body. From there defilement spreads through the whole organism (I'm sure you know what I mean); the cycle of natural cause and effect starts spinning remorselessly; in fact, it's not too difficult to conclude that at the root of it all is a power for evil emanating from the twisted will of the devil himself, who is only too happy to spread wreckage and carnage throughout society, individual lives and of course the church of Christ.

[3:7] It's ironic, isn't it? Mankind was originally put in charge of the earth: our zoos and game parks testify to the fact that there's no category of beasts, birds, reptiles or sea creatures that can't be brought under the control of our so-called master race. [3:8] But this tiny inoffensive flap of flesh located in our mouths resists every effort at subjugation! It's an anarchic principle in a rational universe, a gremlin bent on mayhem, or worse still, a venomous serpent loaded with lethal poison sacs.

3:9-12 *⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.*

Sweet and bitter cocktail

[3:9] You'll accuse me of getting carried away by my own rhetoric, but I'm being deadly serious, particularly when it comes to the church. Turn up to any gathering of Christians, and you'll find everyone singing songs of praise to our wonderful Saviour and Lord, and to our loving God and Father – and quite right too! If we can't give vocal expression to our faith among the company of believers, where can we do it? Yet five minutes later, with the very same tongue that has been giving honour and glory to God, there we are slagging off our fellow-men and women and passing judgment on them as if we had no idea they were made in God's image. [3:10] It's quite incredible that through the same pair of lips there could pass a stream of praise and spiritual utterance one moment and a volley of spiteful cursing the next. Church, how could you be like this? Is this how you choose to witness to an unbelieving world? [3:11] We're supposed to be offering the pure and clear water of eternal life to all who wish to come and drink – how can that ever-flowing source of heavenly refreshment get mingled with a bitter cocktail of slander and mutual character assassination? [3:12] Oh my fellow-disciples, haven't you heard from those who sat at the feet of the Lord on the mountainside not so many years ago, how he talked about the distinctive fruit each kind of tree bears? Fig trees can't produce olives, neither can vines produce figs. Salt-water pools are undrinkable by their very nature – they don't suddenly start spouting fresh water. So for the tongue of a believer to utter godly counsel one moment and malicious talk the next is totally unnatural, and all the more so if the speaker is a respected mouthpiece of the church.

3:13-16 ¹³ *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.* ¹⁴ *But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.* ¹⁵ *Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.* ¹⁶ *For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

Religious hypocrisy

[3:13] What I've been saying doesn't just apply to people who stand up and give talks. It's all about how this new society to which you belong, and which each of you is responsible for shaping, can become an oasis of heavenly wisdom in a very foolish world. It's not a question of how many expert speakers you have in your particular fellowship; it's about who you can rely on to give wise counsel drawn from a deep knowledge of the Scriptures. That kind of person doesn't shoot their mouth off – they live beautiful lives, constantly attending to others' needs, and far from parading their own insights, they attribute any wisdom they may have to the Lord.

[3:14] I've known churches where the spiritual atmosphere is one of animosity, resentment and jealous rivalry. Everyone is pushing their own line as hard as they can, and of course this results in a religious hypocrisy which effectively prevents the truth of God being proclaimed and lived out. [3:15] This is totally opposite to the Spirit-led counsel which is one of the Father's best gifts and which, as our Lord tried to point out to Nicodemus, comes direct from heaven and isn't a product of earthly reasoning. There is a kind of counterfeit 'spirituality' which masquerades as deep wisdom but is really the product of forces that are trying to undermine the kingdom of heaven. [3:16] It manifests itself in people forming little cliques and taking sides against each other, with the inevitable result that everyone is confused and the boat starts rocking wildly. Things start happening which are definitely not according to the will of God. You say this couldn't go on in the church of Christ. Experience shows otherwise.

3:17-18 ¹⁷ *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.* ¹⁸ *Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*

Forming Christian character

[3:17] So what are the signs that the teaching we are hearing (or giving) really comes from the One True God, without any taint of self-promotion or manipulation on the part of the speaker? God's primary purpose for us is sanctification, which means that the urgent and overriding aim of all instruction must be the forming of Christian character through the work of the Holy Spirit. But how?

- His chief means of doing this is to point us to the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us to be our peace, bringing peace between mankind and God, and peace between the warring factions within mankind
- Jesus' own qualities must characterise any speaker: for instance, his gentleness and humility, his refusal to be judgmental, his tenderness which was still tough enough to challenge evil and unbelief. With this went approachability, the capacity for listening to another's view of the situation, the flexibility which doesn't apply ready-made solutions, but gets to the heart of the person's needs
- Jesus was mercy in action: he wasn't just sentimental, his compassion was heartfelt and immediate and he always took practical steps to make the situation better. If our words really are going to heal and transform lives, we can't pull our punches in favour of any particular person: Jesus could praise Simon Peter for seeing the truth, but then a moment later he could slate him mercilessly for not seeing it
- some people say one thing but really think another; but Jesus wasn't like that, he told it how he was, and his motives were transparently sincere, as ours must be if we're to be servants of Christ.

There's a mini-course in speaking for you! [3:18] Just to add a footnote: Jesus wants peacemakers, reconcilers, mediators; not people who stir up discord or cause divisions, but those who bring harmony and healing. This needs real wisdom from up there! But the results are worth it. Sowing seeds of unity is

like wheat-farming: it's really hard work and may not seem to be getting anywhere at first, but the final result is acres of golden corn, not just beautiful to look at but satisfying the God-hunger of numberless folk.

4:1-3 ¹ *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?* ² *You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.* ³ *When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*

The priority prayer

[4:1] 'James, I wish our local church was like that – but to be realistic, it isn't. There are several wars going on at the moment, people with knives out for one another, battle positions stubbornly drawn up, no love lost between implacable opponents. What can we do about it, if anything?' Well, there is something, but let's diagnose the source of the patient's illness. It ain't the devil out there, it's the devil in here. The control centre of the human heart has only one setting, and that is: 'I want, so I'm going to have.' That's the base from which the whole army operates; those are the battle orders for the day. [4:2] But it's one thing to have a craving, and quite another to satisfy it – so frustration sets in. You feel at the best jealous (of those who have what you don't), at worst murderous (you'd like that person out of the way entirely). But you're still no nearer getting the object of your desires, so you settle down to a long campaign. It's war, war, war. Then you hear a sermon on prayer (yes, had you forgotten, you're actually Christians!). The speaker reminds you of those simple words of Christ: 'Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find,' then he turns it round and suggests that if you're not receiving or finding, maybe it's because you haven't been asking or seeking in the first place. Of course! That's the answer – go directly to God the Father and make your petition to him. [4:3] So that's what you do; but nothing happens. You batter the doors of heaven, and they stay resolutely barred against you. What's going on? I'll tell you what: the controls of your heart are still set to 'Me first'. You haven't prayed the priority prayer, the one the Lord taught as a model for all transactions between mankind and God: '*Your name be hallowed, your kingdom come, your will be done.*' Jesus himself was going to have to say that last phrase through gritted teeth. You see, we've started regarding God as a bank manager, someone we go to extract more cash to spend on the things we like most. Big mistake! He's not a hole in the wall, he's our Father. It's only when our chief delight is in the Lord and in him alone, that he is prepared to give us the desires of our heart. That's the secret – how could we ever have missed it?

4:4-6 ⁴ *You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.* ⁵ *Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?* ⁶ *But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble and oppressed.'*

Made for God

[4:4] So, James, are you saying that our prayers are basically selfish and that's why they don't get answered?' Spiritual adultery. You're like women who have an affair while their husband's back is turned. You're flirting with the gods of this world. Jesus used that word – yes, 'adulterous' was what he said – when he was trying to wake up the Pharisees about the default position of their hearts. The things you secretly want – success, fame, power, money, sex, feeling comfortable about yourself, people's good opinion of you – are things that turn your heart against the true love of God. [4:5] You disagree? You think Scripture's joking when it tells you on every page that God cannot stand rivals, that he's a jealous God who loves us one hundred per cent and who demands our one hundred per cent love in return? We aren't made for this world. We're all little colonies of God longing for our true homes. He's put his Spirit in us to remind us at our soul's core that we're his children, made for him alone, made for eternity. [4:6] So who is going to win this constant tug-of-war, God or not-God? It's only when we find the whole thing impossible that we discover what a great God he is, because the more we fail the more he forgives, and the more we flag the more he assists. That's grace for you. Just don't think it's any credit to you. What does the Book say? 'Once you start thinking you can manage on your own without God, you find he's an implacable foe

who will stop at nothing to bring you crashing to the ground. It's only those who know they've hit rock bottom that he can tenderly lift in his arms, as if they were his only concern in the world.'

4:7-10 ⁷ *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.* ⁸ *Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.* ⁹ *Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.* ¹⁰ *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

How to relate to God

[4:7] 'So, James, how do we receive God's grace? Is it just a matter of being totally receptive, of letting go and letting God do it all?' Yes, of course – but like any relationship, you've got to work at it, just as Jesus did with his Father. Here's a check-list of questions:

- How serious are you about God coming first in your life? Is finding his will and pleasing him your number one priority?
- Are you letting the devil in anywhere? Are you absolutely determined to send him packing? He'll get lost quick enough if you do.
- [4:8] Do you make time to be close to your God? He's promised to be available to those who seek him. But if you can't be bothered, why should he?
- Are your hands completely clean? Is there anything needing to be forgiven that you haven't sorted out with God? (Jesus never had to apologise to his Father, but he knows that we may have to.)
- Is your heart undivided? Or do you keep a secret thought-chamber which you're not prepared to let him clean out?
- [4:9] When was the last time you were really miserable in God's presence? Does your sin, does the world's sin mean so little to you? Yes, we're told to be joyful, of course we are and we should be, but remember Jesus wept over Jerusalem and at the grave of a dear friend. It's not wrong to be totally gutted at the power of unbelief both in ourselves and in those we try to help.
- [4:10] We can pretend in front of other people, but we can't pretend before the Lord. How much time do you spend telling him how good you are? The kingdom is his gift to the utterly unworthy. He's the only one who can lift us heavenwards.

'Just receive God's grace'? How much does he actually matter to you? So many people's religion is no more than a routine, or an insurance policy, or a psychological self-help programme. Heaven help us!

4:11-12 ¹¹ *Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.* ¹² *There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbour?*

Thinking you're God

[4:11] What else is there in my mailbag? Ah, yes. 'I'm seriously worried by the critical spirit in my house-church. People spend their time slagging one another off and dismantling each other's reputations, damning with faint praise, that kind of thing. Why can't we give credit where credit is due?' Absolutely right. I've already majored on the destructive power of the tongue, and here it is again, doing its devilish work. The Lord told us categorically not to judge one another, and he gave us a new commandment to love one another, which is really the old law we've had all along. Once you start pronouncing judgment against anyone, particularly a fellow-Christian, you're actually tearing up the old law and saying it doesn't apply to you. Jesus was adamant that the original Divine laws would apply to the end of time. How can any human being think that they're so above the law that they can freely rubbish it and say we can hurt our neighbour as much as we like? [4:12] There's only one Person in that position, and that's God. It wasn't Moses who gave us the commandments, it was God; and it isn't my Christian friend or colleague who is going to deliver the verdict on my life, it's the Judge of all the earth. If someone is going to be saved from

their sin, it will be God alone who does it; and by the same token, if someone is going to perish eternally, it will be God who makes that momentous decision. Who are these people who drag each other's character through the dirt? Do they think they're God?

4:13-16 ¹³ Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' ¹⁴ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.

Making long-term plans

[4:13] Here's an interesting one. 'Is it wrong to make long-term plans? My company is expanding its business overseas and I've been sent a letter telling me I'm going to be relocated to a certain trade hub for a year in the first instance, where I've got to set up an outlet and make a specified percentage of profit. I'm quite keen to do this as it will obviously raise my standard of living and be a stepping-stone to further promotion. Am I being unspiritual?' [4:14] Examine your assumptions. Your management's view is bounded entirely by their profit and loss account. So in fact is most people's. They prefer not to face the fact that life in this world is fleeting and unpredictable. It's like those early morning mists which hang over the valley for an hour or two then dissolve in the heat of the morning sun. [4:15] God's perspective is totally different from ours. He might want us to be around for decades, or he might be planning to remove us from the scene next week. Whatever his purposes are for us, they're wise and good. We tend to think God is only being 'good' if he fits in with our worldly plans for long life, health, success and so on – but what if he doesn't? It's so liberating if we sit down with him and say, 'Lord, I need to plan out my life a bit' (and that's fine, we need to do that) 'but I fully realise that your ideas may differ from mine and I'm so happy to trust in your loving guidance and go along with your best will for me and my family.' [4:16] Do you see how different that attitude is to the normal arrogant assumptions people make? They think they're the captain of their soul and the master of their fate – but they've left God out of the reckoning, and that's the devil's way to destruction.

4:17 ¹⁷ So then, if you know the good you ought to do and don't do it, you sin.

Useless good intentions

[4:17] 'So, James, how can I avoid sinning against God?' I see what you're getting at. You're terrified of stepping outside God's will, so you tack 'D.V.' onto every statement you make as if there were an iron fate dogging your every footstep. Remember Jesus' story about the two sons who were asked to work in their father's vineyard? Which one did the will of his father? It wasn't the one who just thought it was a good thing to do, but didn't move a finger – it was the other one who changed his mind and actually got down to the job. Good intentions are useless unless they result in action. It's not what you say, but what you do, that counts with God. Haven't I said this again and again?

5:1-3 ¹ Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. ² Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. ³ Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.

Money will make you miserable

[5:1] 'Dear James, I always read your column with great interest, but you do seem to have a fairly jaundiced view of anyone who has a bit of cash to spare. Is it wrong to be rich?' Short answer: no, but. Wealth has its down side. Jesus told story after story to warn us about this. He actually said, 'Woe to you rich people!' Why? Because money will make you miserable. You will literally howl with dismay when it reduces you to abject wretchedness, as it almost certainly will. Let me give you a glimpse of yourself in a few years' time. Your piles of cash have become congealed lumps of metal in the earth where you've stashed them. The fine garments that hang in your elegant cupboards have become a feast for moths. Your treasures have become

worthless: it's as though all those gold and silver coins you counted so lovingly have become pock-marked with rust. You will look at the decay of what was once so beautiful to you, and see a parable of your own soul. Your very physical health will be adversely affected. And how will you spend eternity? Finery now, fire then, as the plutocrat in Jesus' parable discovered. Everything you've ever hoarded will become fuel for the flames, neither will they spare your very own self. Not a great return for all your investments, is it?

5:4-6 ⁴ Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. ⁵ You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.

Generosity and judgment

[5:4] 'Hold on a moment, James! I've tried to be as generous as possible to my workforce and to any disadvantaged people I've come across.' In that case you're a shining exception to the general rule. I wonder if you might be fooling yourself, though. We live in a society where there's a huge gap between rich and poor, between employers and employees. Supposing you're a wheat producer on a smaller or larger scale: you want to maximise your profits, so you hire your harvesters at the last possible moment and pay them the minimum wage. In fact you don't actually pay them on the spot, you tell them to come back tomorrow – and tomorrow – and tomorrow. Don't deny that this is general practice. There's no-one who is going to listen to their indignant cries for help – or is there? Doesn't it say in the Book of the Law that you should pay a labourer his wages that same day, otherwise the Lord (and that doesn't mean his earthly master, it means the God who has the hosts of heaven at his command) will hear his desperate appeal? And, incidentally, will see to it that you too get paid your just wages for your sin. [5:5] But even if this isn't true of you – as I say, you may be the rare exception – let's face it, you've had a cushy life here on earth compared to the majority of your fellow humans. You've lived off the fat of the land and been able to afford pretty well anything you want. But remember what the prophet said about the wicked being like sheep fattened for the day of slaughter – do you realise we'll all be judged for how selfishly we used the portion of wealth God gave us? [5:6] You tell me you've never acted oppressively towards the less privileged: in your position as a magistrate, have you never come down really hard on someone whose guilt you couldn't prove, but whose economic rating or racial origin meant their appeal wouldn't succeed? Or as landowner, have you never hauled a defaulting tenant into court and imposed a crippling fine on him? You could easily have condemned a whole family to starve to death without anyone lifting a finger to help them. If you've got nothing like that on your conscience, great! Because judgment is coming, and there isn't much time to change your ways.

5:7-9 ⁷ Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. ⁹ Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

The King is coming back

[5:7] 'Actually, James, I'm one of the victimised under-class – so are you saying we should rise up in revolution against our oppressors?' Not so fast. Keep your perspective. Jesus is coming back as King, and we've got to hang in there till the great Day dawns. Here's a farmer who's waiting for the seed he planted to bud and sprout and ripen into a precious crop of golden corn; but for all his impatience, there's no way he can hasten its growth, he's just got to bide his time and trust God to give those early-season and late-season rains which will bring it to maturity. [5:8] You've got to take the long view, and hang on as long as it takes in the utter certainty and determination that you'll be there to greet your returning Lord. It's not so long now. Jesus knew what he was talking about. Don't let the cynics get to you. [5:9] And whatever you do – I'm talking to every single disciple of Christ – don't start moaning at each other or blaming everyone else for the mess things have got into. Pass judgment on others, and you'll get judgment passed on you. You

may think the iron-clad gates of history are locked and bolted, but just on the other side of them the King is waiting and biding his time, and if there's any judging or rewarding to be done, he's the One who's going to do it. Mark my words.

5:10-11 ¹⁰ *Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.* ¹¹ *As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*

Hot line to God?

[5:10] 'Have you any idea what we're going through as Christians? And you're saying we should just sit there and take it, because one day far in the future Christ is coming back to put everything right? Why doesn't he help us now?' Well, you're not on your own. You stand in a long and honourable line of servants of God who have been through everything the world can fling at them and who yet remained steadfast. I'm talking of course about the prophets of the Old Testament. Just think what those people went through, just because they had enough bottle to stand up in the midst of their contemporaries and tell them what God thought of them. It's a heavy responsibility, having a hot line to God. [5:11] Yet when all's said and done, we put up statues to those characters. Their memory endures because they in their time endured. Take Job, for instance – as much a prophet of God as any of them – you must know his epic story of suffering, and his blind faith in God's ultimate goodness. What happened to him in the end? That last chapter in the book isn't about a terrifying and vindictive God, it's all about his tender compassion towards the sufferer, not to mention his merciful forgiveness of the three friends whose wisdom was folly in God's eyes. Is it so long ago that a friend of ours called Stephen prayed with his last breath for the absolution of his persecutors? And whose example was he following?

5:12 ¹² *Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear – not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple 'Yes' or 'No.' Otherwise you will be condemned.*

Does God mind the occasional swearword?

[5:12] I'm just going through my mailbag, and this one's popped out. 'You were talking the other day about controlling our tongues. I must admit, I find it hard to prevent the odd swearword from slipping out. In fact, my language can be quite fruity at times. Everybody does it – but do you think God minds?' This may be more serious than you think. It goes back to the Ten Words, of course – the Third Commandment about taking the name of the Lord in vain. Have we any idea of the significance and vital power of that Name? If we use it thoughtlessly, or worse still, to back up some statement that we know isn't quite true, we're really mocking God, and that's devilish in origin. The best thing I can do is to take you back to the explicit ban Jesus slapped on using casual oaths. He talked about not swearing by heaven or earth or indeed by anything else that's under God's control and authority; when we say 'Yes', that should be enough in itself, and likewise when we say 'No'. I'd hate to think of you standing there before the Lord at the Last Day and going through agonies of shame because you'd let your standards slip in this regard.

5:13-16a ¹³ *Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.* ¹⁴ *Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.* ¹⁵ *And the prayer offered in faith will make them well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.* ¹⁶ *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*

How to use God's name

[5:13] The thing is, religious language has tremendous power when it's put to its proper use. Here's someone who is going through a really bad time, whether it's personal misfortune or through other people's malice. The natural reaction is to curse and swear, or at any rate to question the goodness of God – but why not turn language to good effect by actually talking to God about what's happening? If you know God's listening to every word you say, why not give him something wholesome to listen to? By the same

token, if life's going well for you, why not turn up one of the Thanksgiving Psalms and sing it back to God? [5:14] There may be times, of course, when you're smitten by some grievous illness and you can't even summon the strength to lift your hands in prayer. Well, get a message somehow to your wise and compassionate church pastoral team: they'll come round and pray with you, and they might do something symbolic and practical like dabbing a bit of olive oil on your forehead as they call on the name of the Lord your Healer (that's how we should all be using God's Name!). [5:15] Being anointed with oil doesn't mean you're going to die, in fact quite the opposite; it's not magic, but when it's combined with believing prayer it can release tremendous healing power, almost as though the risen Christ were standing by your side and saying 'Up you get!' just as he did to Simon's mother-in-law or Jairus' daughter.

Supposing though you've got something on your conscience, which may even have contributed to your generally low state (I'm not saying there's always that connection). There's absolutely no reason why you can't make a clean breast of it to the Lord, because his promise to heal and his promise to forgive are part and parcel of the same thing. [5:16] So why don't you tell your well-chosen friends about the load you've been carrying, in a few simple words? Then they can pray for you, knowing perfectly well how they aren't pure as the driven snow themselves. The result, nine times out of ten, is healing all round.

5:16b-18 *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.* ¹⁷ *Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.* ¹⁸ *Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.*

Why prayer works

[5:16b] 'James, to be perfectly honest, that kind of prayer is way out of my compass. I'm just an ordinary bloke and I don't eat miracles for breakfast.' Ordinary? Whoever said 'ordinary' about a reborn child of God who's trusted Christ for forgiveness? Prayer as I've been saying isn't some kind of magic talent only a few people have, it's a believer asking God to make a difference in a situation, anyone's situation. It's a scene-changer and a life-saver. [5:17] Take the prophet Elijah. Odd bloke in some ways, but subject to all the normal human emotions, like going OTT one moment then feeling suicidal the next. He goes to God and says, 'This new king Ahab and his wife Jezebel are a national disaster. What are you going to do about it?' And nothing happens. So he goes on nagging God and eventually God says, 'You can tell Ahab I'm going to turn the rains off for the next three-and-a-half years.' Result? Massive drought, famine, whole land parched, people desperate. [5:18] Repeat procedure: ask God to send rain – and not a cloud in the sky. I'm always encouraged by that bit: he has to go on asking till it happens. Big downpour, land recovers, plenty for everyone. Prayer works, because there's a God who listens and acts. He's going to need ordinary people if he's going to do extraordinary things. Get praying!

5:19-20 ¹⁹ *My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring them back,* ²⁰ *remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the way of error will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

Watching out for the wanderer

[5:19-20] I'll end with this one. 'Oh James, I feel particularly gutted just now because a great friend of mine says they don't hold with this Christian stuff any longer, and what's the point of going to church etc etc? I suspect there may be a moral dimension to all this, but what can I do? I don't have a special ministry gift like preaching or explaining the Bible. Can you advise?' I'll tell you the ministry the church needs right now, and has always needed, and that's one-to-one rescue work. Catchers in the rye. There are far too few people watching out for the wanderer. You don't stop a person walking off the edge of the cliff in a fog by shouting or putting up notices. You stop them by taking their arm in a companionable fashion and steering them ever so gently away from the danger. People get off track and you'll find plenty of Christians to tut-tut and issue condemnations, but few to come alongside like our Lord did with the woman caught cheating on her husband. He literally saved her from a messy death – are you someone who could carry on his work

where you are? It doesn't matter how horrendously they've transgressed; what they need is saving, and it's love that must do that. 'Love buries sin out of sight and throws away the shovel' says the old proverb. Jesus dug a burying-place big enough for every sin in the world and then came out to find us. Will you walk with him?

CROSS-REFERENCES: JAMES

Underlined: direct quotation from or clear reference to an Old Testament (normally LXX) or New Testament passage.

*Asterisked: probable or possible allusion. These categories are often blurred, or a matter of guesswork. The other references offer a similar Biblical line of thought, even if James may not have known the text referred to. D A Carson (*Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* 997) writes: 'James' handling of themes has particular resonance with...the teaching of Jesus, not least in the Sermon on the Mount.' We have no idea how much of his brother's teaching James heard personally, but as Carson notes, much of it may have been 'filtered through the common heritage of the early church's teaching and preaching' in which James must have taken a leading part.

1:1 *James if you like* Acts 12:17. *Changed my life* 1 Cor 15:7. *Scattered far and wide* Jn 11:52, 1 Pet 1:1. *New Israel* Gal 6:16.

1:2-4 *Heaven has noticed* *Mt 5:11-12. *Jesus said that too* Mk 4:16-19. *Total stickability* Lk 8:15. *Attuned to God's will* 1 Th 5:23. *No regrets* Saying attributed to the American missionary William Whiting Borden.

1:5-8 *Beginning of wisdom* Prov 1:7. *Badger God for it* Prov 2:3-6. *Will be given to you* Mt 7:8. *Mustard-seed faith* Mt 17:20. *Massive God* Mk 11:22. *In their tiny boat* Lk 8:24. *Having Jesus on board* Mk 4:38. *As Isaiah said* Isa 57:20-21. *However hard they pray* Mt 6:5. *Quiet trust in God* Mt 6:33. *Mr Facing-Both-Ways* A character in John Bunyan *Pilgrim's Progress* part 2.

1:9-11 *Blessing of the Lord* Prov 10:22. *Heavenly treasure* Mt 6:19-21. *Worldly pride* Prov 16:19. *Gone tomorrow* Mt 6:30. *Isaiah and Jeremiah* *Isa 40:6-8, Jer 9:23-24.

1:12-18 *Started on earlier* Jas 1:2-4. *It's survivable* 1 Cor 10:13. *Cheer up when tested* Jas 1:2. *Hard and narrow road* Mt 7:14. *More than anything else* Jn 21:17. *Die for him* Rev 2:10. *Abraham or Job* Gen 22:1, Job 2:3. *For a single second* Hab 1:13. *To our Father* Mt 6:13. *Death and destruction* Isa 59:4, Rom 6:21. *Family of new people* Ezek 36:26-28. *Word who is Jesus* Jn 1:1, 14; 1 Pet 1:23. *The truth and the life* Jn 14:6. *Nothing is going to stop him* Isa 43:12-13.

1:19-21 *Justice and mercy* Mic 6:8. *Leave the judgment bit to God* Deut 32:35, Rom 12:19. *Needs dealing with* Zech 3:3-4. *Healthy crop* Mk 4:20.

1:22-25 *Effect on your life* Lk 11:28. *Longing to set you free* Jn 8:32, 36.

1:26-27 *More about the tongue later* Jas 3:1-12. *Totally out of control* Ps 39:1. *Practise what you preach* Mt 23:3. *Fooling yourself* 1 Cor 3:16-18a. *Worst sins* Isa 1:18. *Jesus being our Friend* Jn 15:14. *Conorting with the enemy* 1 Jn 2:15-16.

2:1-4 *Social background* *Lev 19:15. *Ill-favoured* Rom 12:16.

2:5-7 *Faith that works by love* Gal 5:6. *Rich man and the beggar* Lk 16:19ff. *Trampling on others* Mic 2:2. *Trash that name* Rom 2:24.

2:8-11 *Like a purple thread* Lev 19:18. *Like them to treat you* Mt 7:12. *Best way to live by far* 1 Cor 13:13. *Law of Love* *Mt 22:37-40. *Adultery as well* Exod 20:13-14. *Tantamount to murder* *Mt 5:21-22, 27-28. *Comes from the heart* Mk 7:21-23.

2:12-13 *I thought you said* *Jas 1:25. *Come under judgment* Jn 5:24. *Under grace* Rom 6:14. *Trivial by comparison* Mt 18:23ff. *Only reject them* Mt 8:10-13.

2:14-19 *Like the manna* Exod 16:20. *Being one God* *Dt 6:4. *They shrieked* Mk 1:24, 5:7.

2:20-24 *Father of our faith* *Gen 17:4, Rom 4:11-12. *Hill-top altar* *Gen 22:2. *To slay the lad* Gen 22:10. *In the Book of the righteous* Gen 15:6. *Has a relationship* *2 Chr 20:7; Isa 41:8. *What you profess* Jn 14:15. *Show me* Gal 5:6; 1 Jn 3:17.

2:25-26 *Ancestor of mine* Mt 1:5, 16. *Town brothel* *Josh 2:1ff. *Saved her life* Heb 11:31. *Membership in Israel* *Josh 6:25.

3:1-2 *Already touched on* Jas 1:26. *In the whole team* Mt 12:37. *The exact word* Prov 25:11. *Young spirited horse* Jas 1:26.

3:3-5a *Wisdom* Jas 1:5. *Gifts from God* Jas 1:17. *Selfish ambition* Mt 12:34-35.

3:5b-8 *Fallen human nature* 1 Jn 2:15-17. *In charge of the earth* Gen 1:28. *Poison sacs* Ps 140:3.

3:9-12 *Unbelieving world* Jn 17:20-21. *Water of eternal life* Rev 22:17. *Come and drink* Jn 7:38. *Distinctive fruit* *Mt 7:16.

3:13-16 *Spirit-led counsel* Isa 11:2. *Father's best gifts* Lk 11:13. *Nicodemus* Jn 3:3, 7, 12. *Rocking wildly* 1 Cor 3:3-4. *Experience shows otherwise* 1 Cor 5:1-2.

3:17-18 *One True God* Jas 1:17, 3:15. *Manipulation* 1 Th 2:3. *Sanctification* 1 Th 4:3. *Holy people of God* 1 Th 5:23, Heb 12:14. *Our peace* Eph 2:14-17. *Gentleness and humility* 2 Cor 10:1. *Refusal to be judgmental* Jn 8:11. *Challenge evil and unbelief* Mk 9:23-24. *Ready-made solutions* Mk 7:28-29. *His compassion* Mt 9:36. *Took practical steps* Lk 10:33-37, Mk 10:48-49. *Transform*

lives Isa 55:10-13. Slate him mercilessly Mt 16:17, 23. Transparently sincere Jn 8:46. Servants of Christ Rom 16:18. Jesus wants peacemakers Mt 5:9. God-hunger Mt 5:6.

4:1-3 *You will receive *Mt 7:7. Your will be done Mt 6:9-10. Gritted teeth Mt 26:39. Desires of our heart Ps 37:4.*

4:4-6 *Adulterous Mk 8:38. Love in return Exod 20:5, Zech 8:2. Longing for our true homes Ps 63:1, 84:2. His true children Rom 8:16. Constant tug-of-war Gal 5:17. What does the Book say? Prov 3:34 LXX. Crashing to the ground Dan 4:37. Lift in his arms Isa 40:11.*

4:7-10 *Got to work at it Phil 2:12-13. Number one priority Jn 8:29. Letting the devil in anywhere Jn 14:30-31. Get lost Lk 4:13. Close to your God Mk 1:35. Those who seek him Jer 29:12-13. Why should he 2 Chr 15:2. We may have to Jn 13:10. Secret thought-chamber Ezek 8:12. Let him clean out Jn 17:19. Really miserable Mt 5:4. Wept over Jerusalem Lk 19:41. Grave of a dear friend Jn 11:35. How good you are Lk 18:11. Utterly unworthy Mt 5:3. Lift us heavenwards Jn 17:22, 24.*

4:11-12 *Power of the tongue Jas 1:26, 3:1ff. Judge one another *Mt 7:1-5. Love one another Jn 13:34. Had all along 1 Jn 2:7, Lev 19:18. To the end of time Mt 5:18. That's God *Isa 33:22. Judge of all the earth Gen 18:25. God alone Isa 43:11, Hos 13:4. Momentous decision Mt 10:28.*

4:13-16 *Ideas may differ Isa 55:8-9. Way to destruction Mt 7:13.*

4:17 *Father's vineyard Mt 21:28ff. Again and again Jas 1:22ff, 2:14ff.*

5:1-3 *Rich people Lk 6:24. Story after story Lk 12:13ff, 16:19ff. Feast for moths *Mt 6:19. Plutocrat Lk 16:24.*

5:4-6 *As generous as possible 1 Tim 6:18. Last possible moment Mt 20:6. In the Book of the Law Dt 24:15. Hosts of heaven Rom 9:29. Wages for your sin Ezek 18:4. Anything you want Lk 12:19. What the prophet said *Jer 12:3. Change your ways Ezek 18:30-32.*

5:7-9 *Late-season rains *Dt 11:14. Returning Lord 1 Jn 2:28. What he was talking about Mt 24:27, 37. Cynics 2 Pet 3:4. Judgment passed on you *Mt 7:1. Judging or rewarding Rev 22:12.*

5:10-13 *Prophets Mt 5:12, Heb 11:32ff. Their memory endures 4 Macc 1:10-11. God's ultimate goodness Job 13:15, 23:12. Tender compassion *Job 42:10ff. Folly in God's eyes Job 42:8. Stephen Acts 7:60. Whose example Lk 23:34.*

5:12 *Name of the Lord in vain Exod 20:7. Devilish in origin Mt 5:37b. When we say no *Mt 5:37a. Standards slip Mt 12:37, Jas 3:1.*

5:13-16a *Olive oil Mk 6:13. God's name Mal 4:2. Simon's mother-in-law Mk 1:31. Jairus' daughter Mk 5:41. Heal ... forgive Ps 103:3. Pure as the driven snow Ps 51:7.*

5:16b-18 *Jezebel 1 Ki 16:31. Turn the rains off *1 Ki 17:1. Has to go on asking *1 Ki 18:43.*

5:19-20 *Catcher in the rye Title of book by J D Salinger. Ever so gently Gal 6:1. Caught cheating Jn 8:2-11. Where you are 1 Jn 4:17. The old proverb Prov 10:12. To find us Lk 19:10.*

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